

Stop. Look. Listen



If you've noticed some unusual street signs around Providence in recent months, they're the work of a street artist known as **Ghostbutter**, who has put up wry, encouraging signs throughout the city. Camouflaged to look like yellow street signs, his work catches you by surprise with messages meant to bolster spirits during the pandemic.

Davis Alianiello (Motif): What inspired you to do this project?

Ghostbutter: I was inspired to do this project because of two things: the pandemic and the death of my

father. My father died this past January and ever since I have just been trying to put two and two together. The signs are a very public kind of Note to Self to try and get myself back on track. "So Lovin U," "Don't Lose Heart," "Almost There," are all things I've been telling myself. They're like those self-affirming Post-It notes people sometimes put up around their homes, but in this case they're street signs and very out in public. The pandemic obviously plays a huge part in this, too. I think it's been a long slog and I'm trying to slyly give people a little encouragement. I think it was important for me personally to do it publicly because so much ease and general humanity has been stripped from our public spaces in the last year.

DA: What do you think the role of public art should be?

Ghostbutter: I think public art should surprise people to begin with. And then like all other art, I think, from there it should either disturb the comfortable or comfort the disturbed (David Foster Wallace is where I heard that first, but it's likely attributable to other sources). In this case, I'm trying to create work that comforts the disturbed. Also it should wrestle with the contradiction of its own existence, and other contradictions. Most of the time public art doesn't do this because it gets watered down by committee. That's why guerilla public art gets me — it's not agreed upon or approved. It's just one person desperately putting something up on the street trying not to get caught.

DA: In a way, your art seems intentionally inconspicuous, unlike a lot of street art. What do you hope a viewer's experience of your art would be?

Ghostbutter: Yes, with the signs, being inconspicuous is entirely the point of what I'm doing. I'm trying to camouflage myself, pretend as though I'm just something state issued. I like taking on that voice of the state because normally it's simply the facts relayed in the most dispassionate way. Caution Speed Bump. I figured that if I could take on that voice and then say something utterly empathetic and human then I could surprise people in a decent enough way, kind of catch them a little off guard. Also personally I really respond to the contradiction of form and the content. That's the kind of stuff that I stay up late thinking about.

DA: What's your favorite of the signs?

Ghostbutter: Don't Lose Heart. I've made that one a few times already and I think it stays truest to my original vision of the piece. Street signs are often telling you not to do something, so it seems really to fit in with the existing Street Sign Tone. Also it has three words and the first two are negative and the last one is positive, so it has a kind of contradiction at play just in the language. Like one of those haiku poems where in a three line poem, the third line is a complete repudiation of the first two lines. Also so far it's the one I relate to most.